



Belarus Brief: Intimation, humor and where can the international community go from here?

March 21, 2006 (20.30 CET)¹

Findings

1) Current developments suggest that the regime of Alexander Lukashenka is trying to avoid using direct force against protesters while purporting to disperse the opposition protests using a combination of well targeted intimidation and detentions in Minsk, and an effective information blockade for the rest of the country. Nevertheless, hundreds of detained people in the last 24 hours are decreasing the possibility for mass protest. On Tuesday evening, there are still some 5,000 people in the main square. Time and weather conditions are working for the regime. In the evening Milinkevich called return to square on March 25, the "Freedom Day".

2) Despite the regime's efforts, fear was largely overcome by strong expectations, good atmosphere in the square in the past two days, but also due to the new tactics of regime not to crackdown on protesters. Along with demystification of the regime within society, acceptance and support of the democratic alternative is likely to grow. This is confirmed by numerous anecdotes from Minsk, mentioned below.

3) According to field reports, however, the success of the regime's information blockade and skepticism toward the declared goal of the protest (new Presidential elections called by both Milinkevich and Kazulin) is a limitation for many people in Minsk, who are otherwise supportive of the anti-Lukashenka cause.

Updates

Intimidation/Repressions

4) From yesterday night, riot police and people in civilian clothes have been blocking access to the Oktiabrskaja square, detaining those who bring food, warm drinks and clothes to the protesters. Local sources were reporting about the prohibition of selling any warm drinks in restaurants around the square.

5) According to human rights NGO Viasna, there were 108 people detained last night. This number could be considerably higher since the police and the Ministry of the Interior refuse to provide information on number and names of the detained even to relatives and friends. Detainees were reporting of being assaulted in police vehicles.

6) Among those detained were also UCP Chairman Anatolij Lebedko (received 15 days arrest), BPF vice-chairman Alexej Janukevich (received 12 days), student leader Tatsiana Khoma (received 10 days), lawyer for NGO Assembly Yuriy Chavusau (received 10 days). The whereabouts of UCP Deputy Chairman Alexander Dobrovolski are unknown.

7) Perhaps Zubr activist Oleg Metelitsa – suffering his 3rd administrative arrest in a row today - is the most characteristic to describe authorities' tactics. Metelitsa was arrested today for "hooliganism", 10 minutes after he was released from spending 15 days for similar charge. Between his first and second arrest he was released also for 10 minutes.

8) Ukrainians detained at the demonstration on March 20 have been deported to Ukraine today. According to Rustavi TV channel 3 Georgians were detained in Minsk in the evening of March 20. Two Estonian observers

¹ This briefing was produced for the institute for civic diplomacy, Pontis Foundation, Slovakia. More details about their work can be found at www.pontisfoundation.sk

were detained today without official registration as observers. Also, KGB officials reportedly detained Polish MP Jaroslaw Jagello.

Anecdotes

9) Some started to call the protest "revolution in a freezer" given the extremely cold conditions in Minsk: minus 7 and snow storm on March 19 evening. Today a new transparent has appeared stating "it is a sweet word, ex-president...".

10) Others called the protest a race between "Santa Claus vs. Milinkevich". At New Year's Eve many Belarusians are coming to the same square to celebrate. In terms of numbers of people, Milinkevich is beating Santa Claus so far.

11) Since early morning today police are all around the square checking bags from everyone approaching the protestors, looking for food, drinks and warm clothes. Those supplying the protesters were not allowed to the square or detained. But by the time European ambassadors came to square to meet protesters, authorities quickly withdrew all police security forces from around the square. Shortly after EU Head of Missions left the square, police forces including OMON troops returned to their posts around the square.

International Community: Where we can go from here?

12) While the EU and US have condemned the poll as flawed, Russia accepted the results with pleasure and relief. While the United States clearly said that it won't accept Lukashenka as president, Monday's debate of the EU foreign ministers during GAERC (General Affaires and External Relations Council) meeting showed that some of the member states are trying to avoid direct confrontation with Lukashenka's Belarus – and Russia. According to Press Releases from March 20, the Austrian Presidency considered the most important event of the day to be meeting with the Lebanese Prime Minister.

13) According to RFE/RL, Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic were asking for harsher measures during Monday debate. "Among those pushing hard for tough EU action, Lithuania said the EU should contest the legitimacy of the election result. Slovakia wanted an EU statement denying Lukashenka recognition as the winner of the poll. Poland asked for sweeping visa bans and the freezing of assets of officials responsible for violations, as well as targeted economic sanctions. Czech FM suggested opposition leader Alyaksandr Milinkevich should be invited to attend the EU summit in Brussels later this week. But German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeyer argued that a hasty and ill-considered reaction could damage the EU's future options regarding Belarus."

14) With its declared objective of trying not to isolate the people of Belarus, the EU may be on its way to return to the "business as usual" relations with Belarus, having imposed some targeted diplomatic sanctions, but becoming Belarus' most important trading partner.

15) One of the most important questions is whether the democratic opposition will be able to keep the gained momentum after the elections. Upcoming events, such as the "Freedom Day", the declaration of the Belarusian People's Republic of 1918 on March 25 and the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl catastrophe on April 26 may prove that there is a new genuine force in Belarus and continue eroding the popular support of Lukashenka.

16) Another key question is the development of relations between Russia and Belarus. It was clear that Russian does not wish to exchange Lukashenka with anybody closer to the West. However, Russia's steps to revive the union state and to hold Lukashenka accountable for his previous promises regarding the privatization of Belarusian energy sector may change current relations and provide more room for the opposition and the international community to maneuver.

17) The presidential election was just the first step - Belarus is out to provide more surprise internally and externally in 2006.